



Professor Wendy Thomson, CBE
Vice-Chancellor, University of London
vice-chancellor@london.ac.uk

Professor Jo Fox
Acting Dean, School of Advanced Study, University of London
jo.fox@sas.ac.uk

cc: sas.orgchange@sas.ac.uk

School of Advanced Study - New Strategy

Dear Professors Thomson and Fox,

On behalf of the editorial board of *The Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs* (the oldest English-language international relations journal, founded in 1910) we are writing in response to the invitation at <https://london.ac.uk/sas-new-strategy> to submit comments on the School of Advanced Study's new strategy, and in particular the proposal to close the Institute of Commonwealth Studies (and the Institute of Latin American Studies).

We and our colleagues are both alarmed and baffled by the proposal to close the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, particularly at this time, when so much of what it covers has moved to the forefront of both public and academic concerns.

We collectively made submissions to the two earlier reviews of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, chaired by Sir Anthony Kenny and Professor Tony Payne, when, as you will know, the reviews recommended the strengthening not weakening (let alone closure) of the institute. We trust that you have studied both the reviews and the evidence submitted to them before coming to the diametrically opposite conclusion.

Ever since its foundation in 1949 the Institute of Commonwealth Studies has been the key institutional hub for the study of the Commonwealth, post-colonial societies, colonial legacies, Black British history, and the politics of ethnicity in the UK, not just in the University of London but in the whole UK academic community. It has built up impressive

networks of scholars and alumni in all these fields; and has developed a substantial role at the cutting edge of research and dissemination.

Among its valuable recent activities have been the Commonwealth Oral History Project – an invaluable resource for current and future scholars of post-colonial relationships; teaching for the MAs in Human Rights and Refugee Protection within an interdisciplinary environment benefitting from work across the Commonwealth; the hosting of numerous PhD students and visiting scholars, who have also gained from the informed and stimulating interdisciplinary ethos of the institute; public engagement and education on a range of key issues of current concern; and regular, highly-regarded, and well-attended seminars and conferences on decolonisation, colonial legacies, human rights, refugee law, media freedom, minority rights, and Black British history, among other important topics, bringing together University of London students and staff, visiting academics, and other experts. The Institute has been responsible for acquiring, cataloguing, and making available library and archives collections which underpin teaching, research, and debate. Symbiosis with a community of scholars and practitioners, such as the institute provides is vital if these collections are to remain current and 'live'.

The continuing vitality of the institute has been shown clearly during the current Covid-19 lockdown by the proliferation of online courses and conferences masterminded and managed by the institute, such as the highly successful conference on 'Taking Stock of the Commonwealth' on 24 June, which included sessions on Commonwealth countries' responses to the pandemic, the role of universities in a post-Covid world, threats to democracy in the Commonwealth, the Windrush scandal, reparations for slavery, and LGBT+ rights in the Commonwealth.

The intention to close the Institute of Commonwealth Studies is particularly baffling given the context of a renewed interest in and indeed urgency of questions relating to imperial and colonial legacies both within the UK and around the world, and against the background of the Brexit-induced transformation of the UK's global interests and engagement, including in relation to the Global South and the Commonwealth in particular. Indeed it is ironic – and will reflect badly on the UK as a whole as well as the University of London in particular – that the School of Advanced Study now proposes to close its two institutes engaging in any serious or systematic manner with the Global South, and its only institute with a proven track record in the area of colonial legacies and Black British history. It is doubly ironic that the proposal comes at a time when the UK is chair in office of the Commonwealth.

There is no doubt in our minds that the closure of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies would cause serious reputational damage to the University of London, both in terms of its academic standing in the UK and even more so in terms of its international reputation, particularly in the Global South. Indeed it will almost certainly be interpreted as evidence of an increasing insularity and retreat from informed engagement with the wider world.

It is suggested at <https://london.ac.uk/sas-new-strategy> that some parts of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies could be hived off and run under the aegis of one or another of the remaining, narrowly disciplinary institutes. The suggestion ignores the lack of relevant expertise in those other institutes, the fact that those other institutes have no similar

proven track record in interdisciplinary and transnational research, the very different academic environments within the institutes, and the painstakingly built and maintained networks, credibility, and convening power of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies itself.

It is also suggested at <https://london.ac.uk/sas-new-strategy> that the proposed closure comes in response to the financial challenges faced by the School of Advanced Study, particularly in the wake of the Covid pandemic. We are of course sympathetic to the position of the School of Advanced Study. But this argument is more than slightly undermined by the suggestion that the School will be investing heavily in new areas (very important though these are). We are of course not privy to the financial details of the School, but it is common knowledge that the Institute of Commonwealth Studies is one of the institutes within the School of Advanced Study which has regularly returned a surplus on its budget. The Institute of Commonwealth Studies has had an impact and influence out of proportion to its size and resources, and we suggest that the reputational damage of closing it would far outweigh the value of any financial savings.

Finally, it is suggested at <https://london.ac.uk/sas-new-strategy> that attempts will be made to find the Institute of Latin American Studies a new institutional home, and we wonder why the same is not said of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies. Indeed we find it strange that such attempts have not been made before the announcement of the proposal to close it.

We very much hope that your invitation to comment on these proposals is a genuine one, and that you are willing to reconsider a proposal which we all regard as short-sighted, ill-considered, and against the University of London's own interests.

Yours sincerely,

Victoria Schofield
Chair, The Round Table

Alex May
Hon Secretary, The Round Table